The Receptivity of Career Practitioners Toward Career Development Resources on the Internet

Laura A. Hambley
University of Calgary
Dr. Kris Magnusson
University of Lethbridge

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the receptivity of career practitioners toward career development resources on the Internet. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes of 102 career practitioners toward career development Internet resources were assessed through a researcher-designed survey. Results demonstrated that career practitioners are generally receptive toward career development resources on the Internet; they reacted somewhat positively toward the Internet, and are beginning utilize it. However, there are still a number of concerns that must be alleviated before career practitioners will make greater use of the Internet, most of which can be dealt with through practice and training.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude a pour but d'observer le niveau de réceptivité des personnels des services d'orientation de carrière en ce qui concerne les ressources sur Internet consacrées au perfectionnement professionnel. Les auteurs ont conçu une enquête pour étudier les connaissances et les habiletés, ainsi que les attitudes de 102 praticiens d'orientation de carrière envers les ressources professionnelles sur Internet. Les résultats démontrent qu'en général, les praticiens sont bien disposés envers ces ressources. Ils réagissent plutôt positivement envers l'Internet et commencent à l'utiliser. Cependant, il reste encore quelques sujets d'inquiétudes qui doivent être résolus avant que les praticiens professionnels fassent appel plus souvent à l'Internet. La plupart de ces problèmes peuvent être résolus par la formation et l'utilisation régulière des ressources.

Technology in general, and the Internet in particular, have dramatically changed our society, and have had an impact on almost every aspect of our work and personal lives (Martin, 1997; Noll & Graves, 1996; Verhoeve, 1998). The field of career development has also been influenced by the use of computers in everyday work activities. Each year, the use of technology within career counselling centers is expanding (Noll & Graves, 1996). Thus, there is increased demand on the career counselling profession to utilize technology to effectively help clients (Sampson & Krumboltz, 1991). Career counsellors cannot rely solely on technology, however, but need to achieve a balance between technology and personal communication within their practices (Trepanier, 1998).

The Internet provides an extensive source of information and resources for career practitioners and their clients. Career development resources such as occupational and educational information, labour market trends, employment statistics, company information, job listing, resume, and cover letter information, and

interview tips have become widely available through the Internet (Baldwin, 1998). Harris-Bowlsbey (1998) suggests that the Internet can provide assistance and resources for all stages of the career-planning process. Consequently, there is increasing demand on career practitioners to become proficient at using the Internet.

Research on usage and attitudes toward technology within helping professions is limited. In a study of Internet usage by Social Workers (Marlowe-Carr, 1997), 94% of participants agreed that online services enhanced their capability as helping professionals. Other studies found positive receptivity of school practitioners (Stone, Thompson, & Lacount, 1989) and graduate social work students (Finnegan, 1996) toward computer applications in their current and future professional practice.

To date, little empirical research has been conducted on career practitioners' reactions toward career development resources on the Internet. In particular, little is known about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of career practitioners toward Internet resources. The purpose of the present study was to explore the receptivity of career practitioners toward career development resources on the Internet. The term "career practitioner" has been used to refer to professionals who work with clients around career development issues. These may include career counsellors, psychologists who work in career development, guidance counsellors, and others in this area. Thus, this study represented an initial exploration into some of the issues that will be of increasing importance to career practitioners. The following major research questions were created to guide this exploratory study:

1. How much do career practitioners believe they know about career-related resources on the Internet?
2. How much are career practitioners making use of Internet resources?
3. How comfortable are career practitioners with using the Internet as a source of career related resources?
4. What are career practitioners' reactions to the utility of the Internet as a source of career related resources?
5. Do career practitioners perceive their clients as making use of the Internet for career-related resources?
6. What concerns do career practitioners have about using the Internet as a source of career-related resources?
7. What relationships, if any, exist between the criteria for Internet usage by career practitioners and membership in demographic groups?

METHOD

Participants

Members of the Career Development Association of Alberta (CDAA; $n = 194$), and the Calgary Career Practitioners' Network ($n = 50$), were invited to participate in this study. These individuals demonstrated manifest interest in career development by virtue of their membership in one of these career development organizations. In addition, they spent at least part of their work role engaged in career development related activities.

A total of 102 practitioners (20 males, 77 females, and 5 who did not indicate their gender) responded to the questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from the 20-25 category to the 55-65 category, with the largest percentage (33%) of individuals falling into the age 45-55 category. The majority of the respondents (79%) identified themselves as working in an urban setting. They had been working in the field of career counselling for an average of 7.2 years. Most (72%) of the participants held permanent full-time positions in the field of career development.

The majority of participants (56%) held Bachelor's degrees, which covered a variety of areas. The second most common type of education, a diploma from a college or technical institute, was held by 32% of the sample. Other levels of education represented by the sample include Master's degrees, Doctorate degrees, and courses in career counselling.

Questionnaire

The instrument used in this study was the Survey of the Receptivity of Career Practitioners Toward the Use of Career Development Resources on the Internet. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher to assess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of career practitioners toward career development resources on the Internet. A combination of demographic, forced-choice, and open-ended questions covering the use of online career-related resources were used. This questionnaire consists of 27 items, and takes 15-20 minutes to complete.

A pilot study, designed to assess the face validity of the questionnaire, was conducted using a sample of six colleagues of the researchers who had backgrounds in career development. Participants in the pilot were asked to provide feedback on the utility and clarity of each item on the questionnaire. The items were then edited or modified based on the feedback received. Examples of changes made included rewording certain items for clarity and the addition of an item to one of the checklists.

For the purposes of this article, 13 of these items that focus on demographics and receptivity toward online career development resources will be discussed. The other items pertain to the topic of online career counselling, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the CDAA to send a mail out to all 194 members. Each member was mailed a copy of the questionnaire, along with a letter of information, an Informed Consent form and a stamped return envelope. A reminder letter was sent to members of the CDAA approximately three weeks after the initial mailout. In addition, participants from the Calgary Career Practitioners' Network were asked by the researcher (at two consecutive monthly meetings) if they were willing to complete a questionnaire package, which included the same items as the mail out.

Questionnaires were mailed back during the six-week period following the initial distribution. Of the total of 254 questionnaires distributed, 105

questionnaires were returned (41% response rate). Three questionnaires were not used because most or all questions were unanswered.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis. Simple descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic items. The first six research questions were analyzed in this way. Inferential, non-parametric statistics were used to explore the existence and strength of relationship between predictor and criterion variables (research question #7). The Chi-square statistic was used to determine if significant relationships existed between dependent variables such as "gender," and independent variables such as "Comfort level with the Internet." The Chi-square statistic was an appropriate measure due to the categorical nature of many of the survey questions.

Qualitative Analysis. The open-ended survey responses were coded and categorized using the constant comparison method of data analysis (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). The researcher analyzed the comments from each open-ended question, and sorted them into response categories. Once all responses were categorized, the researcher narrowed them down further by looking for consistencies and similarities. All open-ended response questions were narrowed down to eight categories or less, thereby organizing the multiple responses into succinct categories. These qualitative results reflect the views and opinions of participants that were not assessed by the forced-choice items.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Following is a description of the quantitative and qualitative results from the seven research questions that guided this study. Results are presented according to their corresponding research question.

First, participants were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, how knowledgeable they considered themselves to be about career-related resources on the Internet. The Likert scale used ranged from very knowledgeable (1) to not very knowledgeable (5). The mean rating for this question was a 3.3 (SD = 1.0), reflecting an average knowledge of the Internet for career-related resources.

Next, participants were asked to rate their use of the Internet for career-related resources, once again using a five-point scale ranging from extensive (1) to very little use (5). The mean response to this question was 3.4 (SD = 1.1), indicating an average amount of Internet use. Participants were then asked to indicate how many times per week, on average, they access the Internet for career-related resources. The highest number of participants, 36%, rated themselves as using the Internet for career-related resources an average of one to two times per week. Fifteen percent rated themselves as using the Internet an average of three to four times per week, and 11% responded five to six times per week. Only 9% answered that they make no use of the Internet during an average week.

Third, participants were asked to rate how comfortable they were with using the Internet as a source of career-related information. A five-point Likert scale

was used, ranging from very comfortable (1) to very uncomfortable (5). The mean response to this question was 3.0 (*SD* = 1.2), indicating an average level of comfort with career-related Internet usage.

Following this, participants were asked to rate their reactions toward the utility of the Internet as a source of career-related resources, using a five-point scale ranging from very positive (1) to very negative (5). The mean response to this question was 2.0 (*SD* = 0.9), reflecting a somewhat positive opinion toward the utility of the Internet for career-related resources.

Fifth, participants were asked to rate, to the best of their knowledge, the amount of use that their clients were making of the Internet as a source of career-related resources. The five-point scale used ranged from very much (1) to not at all (5). The mean response was 3.2 (*SD* = 0.8), meaning that career practitioners believe their clients are sometimes making use of the Internet for career-related resources.

Sixth, participants were asked about their concerns with the Internet as a source of career-related resources. Six possible concerns were given on a checklist, with a space to specify others. The top four concerns (see Table 1) were that the Internet is too time consuming (72%), that it is difficult to access information and resources (43%), that the material available was of poor quality (32%) and that a lack of knowledge hindered participants use of the Internet (29%).

The last phase of the analysis addressed the seventh research question. This question explored the extent to which Internet usage was related to demographic groupings. Three significant relationships relevant to this topic were found. First,

TABLE 1

Concerns With the Internet as a Source of Career-Related Resources

Concern	*n*	%
Too time-consuming	68	72%
Difficult to access information/resources	40	43%
Do not know how to use	27	29%
Expensive	19	20%
Not enough career-related information	8	9%
No useful information/resources	5	5%
Other Concerns		
Quality of material	30	32%
Barriers to use	13	14%
Time issues	9	10%
Lack of assistance	3	3%
Problems with medium	2	2%
Other methods better	1	1%

a significant relationship was found between the setting in which participants live and the number of times per week that they use the Internet to access career-related resources (χ^2 = 9.37, df = 3, p = .025). Career practitioners in rural settings were more likely to use the Internet seven or more times per week than their urban counterparts (42.1% compared to 18.1%, respectively). Furthermore, all rural participants made use of the Internet, whereas nine urban career practitioners (12.5%) responded that they do not use the Internet.

A second significant relationship was found between percentage of time on the job spent doing career-related activities and practitioner perceptions of how much clients are making use of the Internet (χ^2 = 12.73, df = 2, p = .002). Participants who spent less than half of their time doing career-related activities were more likely to rate their clients as using the Internet not very much/not at all (54.3%). In contrast, only 23.0% of the practitioners who spent more than half of their time doing career-related activities held similar perceptions of their clients.

The third significant relationship found was between participants' level of education and their reactions toward the utility of the Internet (χ^2 = 15.96, df = 4, p = .003). The more education that career practitioners had, the more likely they were to have a positive reaction to the use of the Internet as a source of career-related resources. For example, 88.2% of the participants with graduate level training reacted positively toward the Internet, compared to 77.1% of those with post-secondary education. At the other end of the scale, 66.7% of the participants with high school education viewed the Internet as negative or very negative.

DISCUSSION

Results from this study indicated that career practitioners perceive themselves as having an average level of knowledge about career-related Internet resources. Despite this level of knowledge, they perceived themselves as making only *average* use of the Internet for career-related resources, with the highest percentage (36%) accessing it a mere 1-2 times per week. These results point to the fact that, on average, career practitioners are currently making little use of the Internet, despite perceiving themselves as having average knowledge. One possible conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that practitioners rate their knowledge based on use of one or two sites. For example, they may focus on a single Web site, and make little use of others. Consequently, their overall Internet use would be low because they are only using one Web site, but their perceived knowledge would be average.

Responses to the item on comfort level indicated that practitioners feel an average level of comfort with the Internet. This result is surprising, considering that most (60%) of the sample indicated accessing the Internet four or less times per week. Given their limited use of the Internet, it may have been expected that the majority of the sample would rate themselves as being uncomfortable. Perhaps these participants were using their comfort level with one or two sites to reflect their overall comfort with the Internet.

When asked about their reactions toward the utility of the Internet as a source of career-related resources, the sample indicated an overall *somewhat positive* opinion. Thus, these practitioners are likely viewing the Internet as helping them, or being capable of helping them, with some aspect of their practice.

The participants were asked about their perceptions of client Internet use for career-related purposes. The results indicated that they perceived their clients as *sometimes* making use of the Internet for career-related purposes. Thus, despite the vast amount of useful career-related information available to clients, practitioners believe clients are currently not making much use of it. An explanation for this perceived lack of client use could be that many clients do not have access to the Internet, or if they do, this access is slow and frustrating. It may be difficult for clients to use the Internet, and practitioners might not have time to provide demonstrations within sessions. Client usage would likely increase if practitioners gave demonstrations of these sites to clients in sessions, and if clients were given free access to the Internet by agencies. Budget and time constraints often mitigate against these possibilities.

Practitioners have many concerns with the use of the Internet as a source of career-related resources. Their concerns may be related to limited use of the Internet and problems with outdated technology. Perhaps if some of the widely noted problems with the Internet (e.g., too time consuming, difficult to access, and lack of knowledge regarding how to use it) were alleviated, overall use of the Internet would increase.

Many of the concerns noted in this survey could be addressed by increased availability of Internet training and assistance to career practitioners. In turn, practitioners could help their clients to effectively use the Internet. The need for increasing the amount of Internet training in educational settings, as well as through provincial and national organizations, was suggested by survey participants in a study of social workers and the Internet (Marlowe-Carr, 1997). Also, Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno (1997) recommend that practitioner educators help students make effective use of the Internet and anticipate the future of the Internet in the delivery of counselling services. If practitioners were more proficient and knowledgeable about using the Internet, and were able to distinguish high from low quality sites, they would be more likely to use the Internet with their clients. Such training for career practitioners, both within educational programs and through workshops for those already practicing, would likely alleviate some of their concerns. In addition to increasing formal Internet-training, practitioners could share information and tips with each other. This sharing would likely contribute to greater comfort with the Internet.

Web site builders and information providers also have some responsibility for improving Internet usage. High quality web sites have accurate information, are easy to use, and offer online assistance. Offer and Watts (1997) echo the need for service providers to structure their sites so that the user can easily focus on valuable information.

Other practitioner concerns (e.g., expensive, barriers to use, and problems with the medium) are more difficult problems to deal with, and require time for the technology to become affordable. More funding for sites and public Internet access will increase access to underserved clients. It is crucial that the technology used does not itself pose a barrier to usage; Internet access needs to be relatively easy and time effective.

It was found that rural participants access the Internet more frequently than their urban counterparts. Rural practitioners may not have access to resources that urban practitioners do, and therefore rely more on Internet resources to enhance their career development work. The finding that *all* rural career practitioners in the sample used the Internet supports the utility and necessity of this technology for practitioners in remote locations.

It was interesting to find that practitioners who spent more time doing career-related work tended to perceive clients as making more use of the Internet. Clients are probably more likely to use the Internet if they have a career practitioner who is using it on a regular basis, and is excited and motivated about its usefulness. Baldwin (1998) speaks to the importance of *showing* clients what the Internet can offer by modeling useful sites within sessions.

Practitioners with the highest levels of education (graduate school) appeared to have a more positive reaction to the Internet than those with less education. Those with the least education (high school) rated the Internet most negatively. This may be due to the greater exposure to computer applications that often comes with higher education. In other words, those who have attended more years of post-secondary education will have likely had more exposure to computers, and therefore be more aware of the benefits of the Internet.

Limitations of Study

Random sampling was not used in this study, and therefore caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings. However, while this sample may not be representative of the population of Canadian career practitioners with respect to Internet use, it may be considered to be a fair reflection of practice within one area of Canada. In fact, it may be an overly optimistic picture of Internet receptivity. Most of the practitioners who responded to the survey already use the Internet and therefore may have viewed the survey as more relevant than those who did not respond. Those who did not respond may be more resistant to technological advances, thereby making the sample of respondents more positive overall.

Another limitation of this study was that the questions were based on participants' subjective ratings, rather than objective measures, of their knowledge and skills. How one participant defines "very knowledgeable" might be quite different from the definition of another. Likewise, "extensive use" of the Internet might be defined quite differently by various career practitioners. Thus, the results are based on practitioner perceptions rather than "objective" data.

Suggestions for Future Research

Much of the current literature on the Internet and career development is in the form of discussion or position papers introducing readers to this new frontier, and there is clearly a need for more empirical research on this topic. As the Internet increases in use, and more career-related sites are available on the Internet, the profession is ethically bound to research this technology, and establish guidelines for Internet use. Rather than continue to focus on "what is out there," we need to also determine "how it works," "whether it helps," and "how to improve it." Future research on the Internet and career development should try to determine the effect of Internet use on the outcomes of career counselling (efficacy research), and how career practitioners can most effectively be trained to incorporate the Internet into their practice.

Summary

The results of this study suggest that many career practitioners are generally receptive to the use of the Internet in their practice, but there still seems to be much work to be done. The availability of career-related Internet resources will likely continue to increase at a rapid rate. As a result, career practitioners need to be proficient in the use of the Internet, and equally proficient in their ability to critically evaluate the utility of a site for their practice. Taken together, the findings of this study underscore the importance of further training and practice for career practitioners in the use of the Internet, and the need to develop specific guidelines for the evaluation and recommendation of career-related Internet resources.

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About the Authors

Laura Hambley, B.A, M.Sc., is a graduate of the Counselling Psychology programme at the University of Calgary. She is currently enjoying her full-time work in the field of career-related Internet technologies. Her research interests include Internet use within the field of career development, competency management, and online career counselling.

Kris Magnusson, Ph.D., is a Professor of Counselling Pyschology in the Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge. His primary research interests are in areas of counselling psychology, career development, and organizational planning and renewal.

Address correspondence to Laura Hambley, 33 Edgeford Way, NW, Calgary, Alberta, T3A 2S9.